

Angry, Lonely Children (Therapy 2)

Dale Easley's blog

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Today I want to reflect back on my two most recent therapy sessions. If you've read my blog before, you know that my therapist uses the Internal Family Systems approach [link]. Together we explore the parts that make up my personality. Some parts formed fairly recently, but some have been with me since childhood. It was two of the latter that I encountered recently.

I love stories where the hero is a lonely individual who gradually builds a community around himself. Think Harry Potter living under the stairwell of his aunt's house, or Malcom Reynolds fighting a hopeless battle, then going off into space aboard his ship, the *Serenity* [link]. But despite the community they build, there is still a core of solitude that's never quite eliminated. "We all die alone," Mal says.

As I explored in therapy, I found a similar solitary part in myself. I named it The Lonely Child. As we talked, it showed me a number of images from my childhood that helped form this identity. There's no need to dwell on those experiences. Instead, I focused upon what the part had given me—a tremendous love of reading and an ability to spend long hours alone, a key to my career but also a great source of joy. In essence, the insight moved my thinking from lonely to alone.

The second part I encountered was a bit tougher to appreciate—The Angry Child. Some of the experiences it showed me overlapped with The Lonely Child, but its response was quite different. It grew angry, but, out of fear, it was forced to be quiet. My older sister has said that she can't remember seeing me angry as a child. I must have learned pretty early on to suppress my anger, but it was still there, taken on by The Angry Child.

When I refused to listen to The Angry Child (for decades), he had ways of making his presence known—irritability, passive-aggressive behavior, occasional outbursts, self-hatred. With a previous therapist, I began acknowledging the anger I carried, but this time my goal was to actually appreciate the part and what it has done for me. The key insight was that it is and can be a tremendous source of energy and assertiveness. One of my promises to it was to consult it and listen to its views. In return, it promised not to pop up unexpectedly.

Beginning to acknowledge parts of ourselves that we've tried to suppress or deny exist doesn't mean turning over control to them, a fear many of us have. We can negotiate with these parts not to overwhelm us. As we move towards

actively appreciating their contributions and insights, it's empowering—being able to work alone is a more powerful view than of being lonely. Being assertive is more powerful than simply being angry.

Since my last therapy session, I've begun digging into a central shaper of my identity—my love/hate relationship with the church of my youth. My feelings about fundamentalism (and arrogance, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness) flavor my most important relationships, and seldom for the better. More on that soon, I hope.